

China Dialogues Turns Collaboration into Art

Nov 18, 2015



In a new project at the Usdan Gallery at Bennington College, artists, dancers, curators, students, and thinkers from China and the U.S. are turning the process of collaboration into a form of art. The gallery is open Tuesdays through Saturdays 1:00 to 5:00 pm; admission is free.

New Forms of Artistic Collaboration

What can an artistic collaboration across oceans, countries, cultures, disciplines, and languages look like?

A visit to "China Dialogues," a new project at Usdan Gallery, might give you an idea.

There, Zhang Yangen, a sculptor and professor at the Guangxi Arts Institute in China, and Dai Jian, a teaching fellow in the Master of Fine Arts in Dance program at Bennington, are working with students, faculty, and staff here at the College and students in China to imagine collaboration as a form of art.

The project came about from conversations between faculty member Jon Isherwood and Michael Suh, curator and executive director of the Museum of Contemporary Art Beijing, about having Suh curating an exhibition at the Usdan Gallery. Eventually, the two wondered what might happen if, instead of shipping Chinese art to Bennington, they invited a Chinese artist to come and work on campus.

For Yangen, who is in residence at Bennington for two weeks in October, the experience was entirely new, given that collaborative and social practices of art are not common on the Chinese art scene. For Dai Jian, who has done collaborative performances with other dancers and artists in museum contexts, the challenge was how to connect and conceive ideas at such a distance.

Digital Connections Made Real

Yangen and Dai Jian decided to turn these challenges into art, and put the process of working on display.

Since their earliest contact was via text messaging and other electronic communications, the Internet and digital culture became the focal point of the project. When he arrived on campus, Yangen set about fabricating a massive, deconstructed "@" sign out of lath and wire in the middle of the gallery space, and covered it with hundreds of items of clothing that had been donated by students both in China and here at Bennington.

The connection between old t-shirts and hoodies and digital culture is the Chinese character "衣," which is the word for clothing and the beginning of the word for email. The Chinese students who sent clothing to Bennington heard about the project on social media -- for Yangen, the fact that these conversations start electronically and end up becoming concrete is one of the interesting parts of the project. The red and yellow thread used in hand-sewing the fabric to the framework symbolizes the "common thread" that connects countries and individuals, according to Yangen.

Process Without End

The sculptural element was fabricated with the help of the faculty members and students who drop into the gallery to lend a hand. Students from Ginger Lin's Visual Art in China and language classes act as translators for Yangen, who speaks little English; other students take photos and videos to document the process, take part in fabrication, and contribute in other crucial ways.

Meanwhile, dance students, working with Dai Jian, are workshopping movement pieces that will become an integral part of the of the piece. With the help of music faculty member Nick Brooke, the hanging object was fitted with microphones that amplify the vibrations produced when a body brushes against or moves it, adding a sonic dimension.

Says Dai Jian, "Many collaborations between artists and dancers result in dancers dancing around the work, or adding an element on top of it. But this is different: the dance is an essential part of the piece, it can't be separated from it. The ideas about dance and the ideas about sculpture are happening at once."

Unusually, there will be no final form of the project -- no capstone performance, for example, to mark the "completion" of the collaboration or the artwork. Instead, there have been a series of open rehearsals, and visitors are welcome to see the work as it develops during normal gallery hours.

Many Tentacles

In the spirit of this open-endedness, there are many tentacles of the project taking place all over campus. Students in faculty member Robert Ransick's Social Practices of Art course are working with students at the Guanxi Arts Institute and other art schools on a project in which Bennington students go out into the local community to ask questions posed by the Chinese students, while the Chinese students go out into their city to ask questions posed by Bennington students; the videos and photographs will be displayed in a yet-to-be-determined form.

Students in faculty member Sue Rees's classes are making animations with Chinese students in the form of an exquisite corpse: students take turns adding to the animation without knowing what comes before; the final product is a surprise to everyone who has contributed when it is finally revealed.

"So Much More We Can Do"

These projects will not necessarily be shown in conjunction with the piece at Usdan, but are activities happening under the umbrella of "China Dialogues," as faculty and students imagine ways to deepen and expand the ideas that are flowering there.

Further, the project is conceived as a spur to a whole set of institutional initiatives and conversations focused on how to foster connections between Bennington and larger communities in China in the future.

For Yangen and Dia Jian, the openness of the project allows the possibility that the artwork, too, will be ongoing and organic. They both speak of how rewarding and challenging the process has been, and how they hope it will live beyond Yangen's residency at Bennington.

"We hope it will continue," says Yangen. "There is so much more we can do."

